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Stories Have Histories:

Reflections on the Personal in Personal Storytelling

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In this paper I reflect on the personal in personal storytelling, drawing upon Bakhtin and allied theoretical perspectives in anthropology and cultural psychology. These perspectives converge on the idea that stories are not only forms of representation but also sociocultural practices. Stories do more than evoke events in temporal sequence: they have histories in people's lives. I explore this idea via examples of three oral narrative genres collected as part of ethnographic work in several culturally and ethnically diverse sites. *Stories of personal experience* and *life stories* are explicitly "personal" in that the narrator casts the story in the first-person, but *stories of vicarious experience* invoke (in the third-person) a story about someone else's experience. Yet vicarious tellings are also personal in that they reflect and create bonds between teller and listener. Building on this point, I argue that any story—a written story, a news story, a story from television—can be personalized via contact with stories of personal experience. Such personalized re-workings of narratives occur across the life course and across cultural groups. This process of personalization via personal storytelling helps illuminate a key problem in psychological anthropology and cultural psychology, namely, the co-creation of person and culture.

Keywords: narrative, genre, cultural practices, socialization, life course

I have been studying stories of personal experience since the 1970s when I went to South Baltimore, a working–class European–American community, to do research on early language development. At the time, received wisdom in developmental and educational psychology held that children from low-income families were linguistically deprived. I discovered, to the contrary, that the domestic environment these young children inhabited was dense with oral stories of personal experience, that virtuoso adult narrators were thick on the ground, and that children were able to co-tell stories by two years of age (Miller 1982, 1994; Miller, Cho, and Bracey 2005; Miller and Sperry 1987, 1988). My encounter with these families ignited a lasting curiosity about stories of personal experience.

My curiosity has carried me, in person or vicariously, to many other communities, some in the United States and some in Taiwan (e.g., Fung, Miller, and Lin 2004; Miller, Fung, and Mintz 1996; Miller, Wiley, Fung, and Liang 1997). In this paper I revisit a few of the stories I heard, heeding the advice of Dell Hymes that "one has to live with ... a story for a while" (Hymes 1996: 214) to become sensitive to both its shared and individualized patterns. My goal here is to reflect on the *personal* in storytelling. In this undertaking, I draw upon allied theoretical perspectives from cultural psychology (e.g., Bruner 1990; Miller, and Goodnow 1995) and linguistic anthropology (e.g., Hanks 1996; Koven 2007; Ochs, and Capps 2001; Wortham 2001). Chiefly, however, I borrow from Bakhtin (1981, 1986), the Russian literary theorist and philosopher of language, and his interpreters (Morson, and Emerson 1990; Wertsch 1991). All of these perspectives converge on the fundamental idea that stories are not just forms of representation but also sociocultural practices.

The methodological implication of this idea is far-reaching: it is not sufficient to study stories as disembodied texts, analyzable only in terms of content and structure. Rather, by examining stories as embedded activities it is possible to gain a much deeper understanding. Although most definitions of narrative specify that the events in a narrative are temporally ordered, the approach adopted here reveals that there is much more to narrative temporality than this. Stories exist in time: they have histories in people's lives.

This article is organized as follows. I begin by discussing personal storytelling, a narrative genre that is literally "about" the personal. I then turn to life stories, another explicitly personal genre. Next I explore a related genre that is personal in a more elastic sense: stories of vicarious experience. And finally, I turn to the more general process of "personalization," whereby stories of personal experience come into contact with other stories, rendering them personally meaningful. I conclude by laying out the implications

of these processes for a fundamental problem in cultural psychology and psychological anthropology.

Stories of Personal Experience

A story of personal experience is an oral story in which the narrator invokes a past event from his or her own life. Such stories are a cultural universal although they are defined and practiced in very different ways around the world (Miller and Moore 1989). These stories are obviously personal: the narrator represents the past event as one that he or she experienced. In other words, the narrator and the self-protagonist are one and the same, and this is indicated by the use of the first-person.

The following example from South Baltimore, previously unpublished, is one of many stories that Sharon, a young mother, related one Sunday afternoon to a gathering of women and children, including her mother, her son (10 years old) and daughter (7 years old), her sister and her sister's daughter (16 years old) and granddaughter (9 months old). The occasion was a reunion with the researcher, whom the extended family had known for about fifteen years. The setting was Sharon's mother's back porch. Two radio producers who were interested in recording stories were also invited to this cookout (see Miller, 1994, for more information about the stories that were told on this occasion). In this story, Sharon invoked an incident in which she lost sight of her young daughter when they were swimming.

Example 1

...so the lifeguard comes over, and he gets ahold of my arms and he's looking at me, and...I say, "My little girl's not here, she's in the water! She's in the water!" and he says, "Check the bathroom. We'll go in the water, you go check the bathroom." So I'm running. The whole time I'm running, I'm thinking, "Please God! Please let her be in the bathroom. I'm not going to be able to handle this if she's in the water." And I get up there and what do I see? These two little feet swinging by the toilet (uses her index finger to enact the swinging movement of Tara's feet)... Well, I busted in the door...here she is, she's on the toilet! ...I whip her up, I'm like, "Oh my God!" and I'm hugging her, "Don't you ever come to the bathroom without telling me!" I'm crying my eyes out...She sees I'm so upset and then she looks at me and says, "Mom, I'm not finished pooping yet. Put me down."

In this example, Sharon crafts a suspenseful story around an event that any parent can identity with: the fear that something awful has happened to one's child. She narrates the story from her perspective as the terrified parent, who, ultimately experiences profound relief at the sight of her little girl safely engaged in the most mundane activity.

The folklore and sociolinguistic literatures on American versions of personal storytelling indicate that such stories embrace a myriad of topics and experiences, and that men and women alike engage in this activity. In a path-breaking paper, Labov and Waletzky (1967) devised a formal framework for analyzing such stories (see also Labov 1997). Based on a corpus of stories told by uneducated speakers from Harlem, the Lower East Side of Manhattan, and Martha's Vineyard, this framework has been a touchstone of scholarship for forty years (e.g., Bauman 1986; Bamberg 1997; Johnstone 2006). According to this account, a story of personal experience consists of an ordered set of structural/functional units: abstract or summary; orientation as to time, place, and person; complicating action; evaluation; resolution; and coda.

The beginning of Sharon's story, the place where the abstract and orientation would be found, is missing because at that very moment, I was inserting another tape into the audio recorder. However, we can see here the referential/evaluative core of the story: Sharon narrates the complicating action in temporal order (the life guard comes over, she explains to him that her daughter is missing, he replies, and so on). In the ensuing lines, Sharon represents herself as running and praying; she quotes herself begging God to restore her daughter to her. This evaluative segment slows down the action, adding to the suspense. The resolution to the story is communicated via the visual image of Tara's feet, seen from the perspective of her distraught mother. This emotionally potent moment of resolution and relief is doubly represented in words and gestures. The coda, which draws out the implications of the story for the future, takes the form of a quoted maternal plea/warning, "Don't you ever come to the bathroom without telling me!" However, the story does not end there. Instead, like the Texas men studied by Bauman (1986), Sharon concludes her narrative performance with a stylistic flourish: a punch line rendered in direct quotation.

This way of looking at stories of personal experience has been enormously useful, revealing the formal intricacy of everyday narrative. However, from the standpoint of recent developments in genre theory, it has limitations. Specifically, it does not address the complex embeddedness and fluidity of stories in social life (Bakhtin 1986; Bauman 1992; Hanks 1996; Wertsch 1991). In his classic paper on speech genres, Bakhtin (1986) challenged the idea that genres are static classifications of talk, based only on formal linguistic and stylistic criteria. Instead, he defined speech genres along multiple dimensions, both textual and contextual, including content, style, relationships among the

participants, the overall compositional structures that comprise the interaction as whole, and the affective stances that participants take up. From a Bakhtinian perspective, genres are not rigid templates mechanically applied to situations but rather reflect and extend relatively stable histories of use that offer potential meanings to each interaction (Miller, Hengst, Alexander, and Sperry 2000). The latter point connects to a fundamental premise of Bakhtin's (1981; 1986) understanding of speech genres, and language in general, namely that every utterance has a history: "The speaker is not the biblical Adam, dealing only with virgin and still unnamed objects, giving them names for the first time." (Bakhtin 1986: 93).

How does this point apply to our example? Sharon told her story to an audience of women, most of whom were family members. In this family, as in all the families I studied in South Baltimore, stories of personal experience were shared regularly. And stories about childrearing, childbirth, romantic misadventures and the like were favorite topics among women; they were related in the course of daily life, and in profusion and with great relish at all-female events such as baby showers (Miller 1994). Thus, multiple personal histories intermingled when Sharon told her story: her decades-long history of telling and listening to stories of personal experience in the family context, her equally long but more limited history of telling and listening to female stories among female kin, and her much briefer but still extensive history of telling stories about her own experience as a mother.[1] Following Bakhtin, I suggest that these histories supported Sharon's inclination to tell her story, confident that her audience would appreciate it. Further, I suggest that Sharon's deep familiarity with and enjoyment of personal storytelling, her readiness to launch into a story at every opportunity, is part of what defines the genre of personal storytelling as it is practiced in South Baltimore.

What then, does the situated analysis of this story add to our understanding of the personal in personal storytelling? When an individual from a community like South Baltimore tells a personal story, she does much more than cast a particular past experience in the first-person. She creates another link in her personal history of telling and listening to stories, a history that helps to define her identity as narrator/listener. She makes a personal contribution to sustaining and invigorating the collective cultural/historical practice of such storytelling. Each and every time that Sharon tells a story of personal experience, she builds, changes, or disrupts relationships with the particular others who are present in the event of narration. Thus, the practice of telling stories of personal experi-

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1 In addition, every other participant at the cookout brought her own personal histories of storytelling to the event.

ence involves connecting with other persons. [2]And each of those other persons has a history of listening to and telling his or her own stories. In other words, multiple personal histories of personal storytelling intersect in each new conjunction of teller, story, and listener(s).

Life Stories

A life story is another genre of narrative that is explicitly personal. A life story is an oral account of an individual's life over the long term, a relating of the events that have made the person who he or she is. In her important book, *Life Stories* (1993), Charlotte Linde distinguished life stories from other constructions of the self, such as autobiography or journal writing, defining them specifically as oral stories, with their associated discourse units, that make an evaluative point about the speaker. These stories have extended reportability; bits and pieces of the life story may be told again and again throughout the person's life. Linde's account is based on a corpus of life stories told by middle-class American adults. She acknowledges that the genre, as practiced by this group, is not universal, and she speculates that such stories do not emerge until adolescence.

Whereas a story of personal experience is like a snapshot, invoking a particular event from a person's life, a life story is more complex and has a much broader sweep. However, there is an important relationship between these genres in that life stories are constructed out of stories of personal experience. Translated into Bakhtinian terms (Bakhtin 1986), a story of personal experience is a primary genre, which combines readily to form more complex, secondary genres, in this case, a life story. Of course, most of the many stories of personal experience that individuals tell in everyday life will not end up in their life stories. Some stories have only fleeting reportability; some may be repeated for weeks, months, or years; some may help to define a phase of the individual's life (e.g., adolescence, parenthood). Constructing a life story involves an ongoing process of selection, repetition, pruning, and interpretation with an eye to events that are self-defining over the long term. According to Linde (1993), selection of events as relevant to one's life story is based on the nature of the event, in interaction with local social and cultural conventions. Some life events will be included because they are culturally defined "landmark"

2 Sometimes the persons to whom the narrator connects via narrative are imagined others, as when the narrator tells stories to herself, an example of what Vygotsky (1987) called "inner speech" (Wertsch, 1985, 1991). See Fung (2003) and Miller, Fung, and Koven (2007) for an example.

events: career milestones, marriage, divorce, religious conversion, major illness, and the like. But unconventional events may also be framed for repeated landmark use in a person's life story.

A few years ago, Edith Hudley, Wendy Haight, and I presented Edith Hudley's life story in the book, *"Raise up a child": Human development in an African-American family* (2003).[3] Edith Hudley was born in 1920 on a small family farm in rural Texas, the sixth of eight surviving children. Her mother, Mamie, died of complications of childbirth when Edith was 10 years old, and this became a landmark event in Edith's life story. Here is a small portion of her narrative of her mother's death:

Example 2

And sometimes Mother would be feelin pretty good, and she'd say, "I want ya'll to get up and sing me some songs," And she had special songs that she liked to hear. Grandmother say, "You feelin up to it, Mamie?" "Yeah, Mama, I want to hear 'em sing." And my oldest brother was a basser, and my next oldest brother was a lead singer. And she would have us all together and we'd sing. Sometimes they'd have other young mens come in, young boys then, would come in and sing with my two brothers—a quartet...They'd get together and sing for my mother while she was sick. And when she got to where she couldn't be goin to church, that's what would happen. Different times, different ones would come in and sing, and give her whatever she wanted to hear. They would sing for her. So, I was just raised up in that, in that bond, of givin and reachin out. (Hudley, Haight, and Miller 2003: 21)

In this fragment of her story of her mother's untimely death, Edith weaves threads of meaning that run throughout her life story. These include her mother and father's religious faith that buoyed them up through difficult times and set an example that sustained Edith throughout her long life. Another important thread has to do with the values of giving and reaching out to others, practiced by her parents and the community in which she grew up, even, at times, uniting black and white in a time and place of brutal, institutionalized racism.

3 We asked Edith Hudley to tell the story of her life any way that she wished. We recorded what she said over the course of several recording sessions, some in Haight's home and some in Hudley's home, collecting altogether 23 hours of tape. See Hudley, Haight, and Miller (2003) for a description of the relationships among the three women and for details of the recording, transcription, and analysis.

Here again, a story of personal experience intermingles with the narrator's personal history of narrative. In this instance, however, the story of Mamie's death intermingles with Edith Hudley's history of retelling *this particular story*. That, after all, is what defines a landmark event: a particular story that has prolonged tellability. When I got to know Edith Hudley, late in her life, she referred again and again to her mother's death and to other stories illustrating the indelible mark her mother (and father) left on her. Telling these stories seemed to keep her parents alive as moral and spiritual guides as her own life continued to unfold after their deaths. The repetition of these stories solidified their status as landmarks in her life story; at the same time, as she interpreted her later life experiences through the interpretive lens of her parents' faith-saturated lives, she added layer upon layer of meaning to her own landmark stories.

But there is even more to this complex intermingling: In constructing her life story, Edith knitted her parents' lives, as she remembered and understood them, into her own. Again, multiple personal histories are involved: the brief history of Edith's relationship with her beloved mother, the long history of Edith's retelling of this landmark narrative as part of her own story, and the histories of Edith's relationships with those to whom she told the story, leading to the possibility that they would carry her story forward into their lives. And because Edith's life story, unlike most life stories, was translated into written form and published, it may get taken up by persons she never met. Although Edith Hudley died in 2007, her story continues.

Stories of Vicarious Experience

So far, I have argued, in one long echo of Bakhtin, that first-person stories, whether stories of personal experience or life stories, are always trailing personal histories. In this sense, they are doubly personal—narrated from a personal perspective and embedded in the narrator's personal history. I have also argued that first-person stories bring other persons (with their own histories) into their orbit. According to Erving Goffman, when a story is framed from a personal perspective, listeners are able to "empathetically insert themselves into [the story], vicariously reexperiencing what took place" (Goffman 1974: 504). Such listenings sow the seeds for vicarious retellings.

This is nicely illustrated by the testimony of a caregiver, an aunt, in one of our studies conducted in Taiwan (Miller, Sandel, Liang, and Fung 2001). In the course of an interview about storytelling with children, Mrs. Liang retold a story of personal experience that her mother had told her, thereby converting her mother's story into a story of vicarious experience:

Example 3

Or she'd [her own mother] would say how they were, how [they] went through hardship [chi ku, "to eat bitterness"], how they went through hardship. Then this makes us remember a little bit... [She] walked very, very, very far carrying the salt to sell. Oh, the salt fields were so far away! Salt fields in Tainan. [She told me] how she carried [the salt]. And then I could understand a little of that kind of hardship she [went through]. She described it plainly [without much emotion]. But I know how she went through hardship. From this, really, you could discover, you would feel how hard it was for Mother to go through this kind of hardship to raise us. Really, from this [I] could develop, really, really come to understand, my mother's toil. From this, [I] could develop a kind of, sort of, not really filial piety but a real appreciation of Mom. (Miller, Sandel, Liang, and Fung 2001: 172)

In this story, Mrs. Liang says that her mother told her about working at the distant salt fields, which Mrs. Liang now relates to the interviewer, noting the understanding and appreciation of her mother the story engendered in her. So, the quintessential Bakhtinian question arises: Whose story is it? The mother, who directly experienced the toil and hardship? Or the daughter who deeply empathizes with her mother's experience? Clearly, the answer is both. Although strictly speaking, Mrs. Liang's story is one of vicarious experience, Bakhtin helps us to see that this is personal for her too: it is meaningful because it strengthens her emotional bond with her mother. We might say that Mrs. Liang *personalized* her mother's story through her affective engagement with it.

Personalized Stories

In fact, from the perspective of Bakhtin, any story—a written story, a news story, a story from film or television—can be personalized via contact with stories of personal experience. As mentioned earlier, Bakhtin (1986) emphasized that primary genres, like personal storytelling, combine readily with other genres, thereby exemplifying the general process of hybridization. Remarkably, the capacity and inclination to bring personal stories into contact with other stories can emerge very early in development. Children as young as two years old create hybrid retellings of their favorite written and video/TV stories, juxtaposing their personal experience with the experience of the story characters (Alexander, Miller, and Hengst 2001; Wolfe, and Heath 1992).

For example, when my son was 23 months old, he became attached to *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, the classic children's story written by Beatrix Potter and first published

in 1901. For a period of five weeks, he could not get enough of this story about the little rabbit who disobeyed his mother and wound up in mortal danger in Mr. McGregor's garden. Kurt requested the story every day, often several times a day. He also "retold" the story again and again (see Miller et al. 1993; Miller, Hengst, Alexander, and Sperry 2000, for micro-level analyses of the retellings), that is, he created new tellings by appropriating and weaving together elements from the written story (e.g., Peter Rabbit and other characters, actions, phrasing, expressions of affect).

One of the retellings occurred while I was walking with Kurt in his maternal grandparents' garden. This was not only a place that Kurt enjoyed but also one that he knew was frequented by real rabbits. His grandparents had told him about the nest of baby rabbits under the hydrangea bush. Thus, it was not surprising that this setting engendered a retelling. In parallel with the written story, Kurt imagined that Peter Rabbit walked around the garden, eating plants.

Example 4

Peter Rabbit came around the path (gestures toward the walk). Peter Rabbit came around the walk. Ate this marigold right there. He came up on the porch. He came around the bend. He walked. He stepped on that stalk, right there (gestures toward the garden on the left side of the porch). His mother didn't help him. His mother helped him. (Miller et al. 1993: 112)

As he continued the retelling, Kurt appropriated, with variation, an important plot element from the Peter Rabbit story, namely a prohibition uttered by mother rabbit to Peter: "'Don't step on this little stalk,' mother said. Mother helped him. Mother said, 'Don't step on this pile.' 'Don't walk in there, don't step in there,' mother says. 'Don't go in there. Don't go in there.'" (Miller et al. 1993: 112) Then, Kurt brought his own experience into the retelling, "Grandma planted some flowers in there. Grandma planted some flowers in there. Kurt did help..." (Miller et al. 1993: 112). In fact, Kurt's grandmother *had* planted some flowers in the flower box and Kurt *had* helped her. Thus, Kurt invoked his own personal experience to justify mother rabbit's prohibition.

This very brief recapping of a much more complex analysis shows that Kurt personalized *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* in two ways: by projecting Peter into his grandparents' garden and by incorporating his own story of personal experience (of helping his Grandmother to plant flowers) into the Peter Rabbit story, thereby creating a variant of the plot of the written story.

Of course, the process of bringing personal stories into contact with other narrative genres is not limited to young children, but occurs across the lifespan (Baym 2000; Coles

1989; Wolfe, and Heath 1992). Nor is personalization limited to the cultural worlds of middle-class Americans of European descent (e.g., Basso 1996; Gone 1999, 2005; Paley 1997; Steedman 1986; Stromberg 1993). However, the import of this process has not been adequately appreciated, partly because it has tended not to be the focus of inquiry and partly because the literature is scattered across various fields of study.

Conclusion

One of the most fundamental and mysterious problems in cultural psychology and psychological anthropology is the problem of the co-creation of persons and cultures (Briggs 1992; Miller, Fung, and Koven 2007; Shweder et al. 2006). How do persons and cultures come to constitute one another in the tangle of experience (Briggs 1998)? When people participate in cultural practices, they not only re-create those practices, they also re-create themselves as certain kinds of persons. In each of the examples I have cited in this paper, the narrating participants deploy culture-specific interpretive frameworks and enact culture-specific participant roles. Each and every time that they do so, they carve out culture-specific versions of experience. But, as Jean Briggs (1998) has shown so brilliantly, meaning creation is simultaneously cultural and personal. Each person has access to a limited subset of cultural resources. And his or her engagement with those resources is constrained by affective/cognitive/social factors and histories that are unique to the individual's circumstances. As a result, each person's meaning-making is partial and, to some extent, new. Every cultural resource encompasses the readymade and the emergent (Bauman, and Sherzer 1989).

In this paper I have been shining the spotlight on stories of personal experience, and, by extension, on personalization through storytelling. Is there something unique about the process of personalization via storytelling, compared with the more general process via other cultural resources? I think so. First, in telling a story about one's own experience or in narrating one's life story, the narrator is explicitly claiming experiences as personal. As the stories are repeated again and again, the messages that they carry about the teller and the practice of storytelling itself become habitualized and self-defining. Similarly, when a person retells stories to which he has an affective connection, whether stories from a beloved relative's life or stories from a favorite book, the messages that they index become self-defining and second-nature. When people deliberately revisit certain stories, savoring them, reflecting on them, puzzling over them, recoiling from them, they re-make themselves and their relationships.

Cross-cutting all of this is the critical role of recurrence and repetition (Cole 1996; Goodnow, Miller, and Kessel 1995; Miller 1994; Miller, Fung, and Koven 2007; Scribner, and Cole 1981). In all the communities I have studied, storytelling is a recurring practice and within that recurring practice, certain stories are repeated, sometimes throughout a person's life. Although recurrence is a property of all cultural practices, stories are portable in a distinctive way. As Bauman and Briggs (1990) showed, a story can be easily detached from its circumstances and recontextualized elsewhere. It can be carried away and used again by the narrator. Even if social circumstances do not permit the story to be shared with other people, the narrator may repeatedly tell the story to him/herself, keeping the story alive in heart and mind (Fung 2003; Miller, Fung, and Koven 2007). Even if the person who first told the story has died, the story may live on in the lives of those who listened. Transporting stories across time and space inevitably changes them, yet key elements may emerge intact. Each new telling is unique, and part of what makes it so is the multitude of personal histories it has traversed.

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故事有歷史：
思考故事講述中的個人

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本文借用Bakhtin、人類學以及文化心理學中的相關理論觀點，來思考故事講述中的個人（the personal）。這些理論觀點都認為故事不只是種表意的形式，同時也是種社會文化實踐。故事不只是以時間序列來召喚事件，它在人們的生命中也有其歷史。我透過在幾個文化與族群殊異的地點的民族誌工作、所蒐集的三種口語敘事文類為例，探索上述概念。*個人經驗故事*和*生命故事*明確的很「個人」（personal），敘事者派定故事角色時選擇第一人稱；但*轉述的（vicarious）經驗故事*則召喚了他人經驗（第三人稱）。然而轉述敘事也是個人的，因其反映且創造了講者與聽者間的連結。在這個論點之上，我主張任何故事——書寫的故事、新故事、電視看來的故事——都可以透過與自身經驗的故事聯結，而被個人化。這種敘事的個人化再製（personalized reworkings）在生命歷程的各個階段中出現，也跨越不同文化群體存在。個人講故事的個人化（personalization）過程，有助於闡明心理人類學和文化心理學中的一個關鍵問題——個人與文化的相互建構。

關鍵詞：敘事，文類，文化實踐，社會化，生命歷程